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**THE
Ne'er-Do-Well**

By
REX BEACH

Author of
"The Spotted," "The Banner,"
"The Silver Horde," Etc.

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(Continued from yesterday.)

"Ah, now I see it all!" His face darkened. "So, this is my reward for heeding your advice in regard to Gertrudis. She should have wed Ramon, as was intended, then I would have had a lever with which to lift his father from my path. Very well, then, there is no engagement with this Anthony. It may not be too late even yet to capture Ramon."

"The city is already talking about Gertrudis and Kirk." "No word has been spoken, no promise given. There is not even an understanding. Do you suppose I would allow my great ambition to be thwarted by the whim of a girl, to be upset by a stranger's smile? Bah! At their age I loved a dozen. I could not survive without them." He snapped his fingers. "Come, we will see my friend Anibal at once."

But Mrs. Cortlandt checked him, saying quietly: "That is all right as far as it goes, but you forget the other young man."

"Eh? How so? Gertrudis will not marry this Anthony." "Perhaps she loves him." "Love is a fancy, a something seen through a distant haze, an illusion which vanishes with the sun. In a month, in a year, she will have forgotten; but with me it is different. This is my life's climax; there will be no other."

"But how will you handle Anthony?" Garvel looked at her blankly. "He is in my way. He is ended! Is not that all?"

"I am glad you are practical; so many of you Latin-Americans are so sadly romantic." "And why should I not be practical? I am a business man. I love but two things, money—no, three, my daughter, my success and my country. By this course I will serve all three."

"Since you take this view of it, I am sure that with Ramon's help we can disengage Don Anibal from his course. The general is sensible and doesn't want a fight any more than you do. If your daughter will consent—"

"My dear lady, give yourself no uneasiness. She does not know the meaning of rebellion." "Then let me look up Ramon. He and I will approach the general together." She gave him her neatly gloved hand. "Things are never so bad as they seem."

That afternoon Kirk received a formal communication from the banker which filled him with dismay. It ran: "My Dear Mr. Anthony—To my extreme distress I hear a rumor that Gertrudis is to become your wife. I assure you that neither she nor I blame you in the least for this unfortunate report, but since busy tongues will wag upon the slightest excuse, we feel it best that no further occasion for gossip should be given. I am sure you will co-operate with us. Sincerely and respectfully yours, friend, ANDRES GARVEL."

A sense of betrayal crept over him as he read. What the letter signified, beyond the fact that Mr. Garvel had changed his mind, he could not make out, and he resolved to go at once and demand an explanation. But at the bank he was told that the proprietor had gone home, and he drove to the house only to learn that Senor Garvel and his daughter had left for Las Savanitas not half an hour before. So back through the city he urged his driver, across the bridge and out along the country road.

Darkness had settled when he returned, raging at the trickery that had been practiced upon him. If they thought to gain their point by sending him on wild goose chases like this they were greatly mistaken. He proposed to have Chiquita now, if he had to burst his way to her through barred doors. He had yielded to their left handed customs out of courtesy. It was time now to show his strength. What folly he might have committed it is hard to tell, but he was prevented from putting any extravagant plan into operation by a message from the girl herself.

As he dismissed his coachman and turned toward his quarters Stephanie came to him out of the shadows.

"Chiquita is at the house. She wants to see you."

"Of course she does. I knew this wasn't any of her doing. I've been hunting everywhere for her."

"At 9 o'clock she will be in the Plaza. You know the dark place across from the church? If we do not come wait."

Long before the appointed time Kirk was at the place of meeting, but scarcely had the city chimes rung out when he saw two women emerge from the dark side street next the Garvel mansion and come swiftly toward him.

He refrained from rushing out to meet them, but when they were close to his place of concealment he stepped forward, with Chiquita's name upon his lips and his arms outstretched. She drew away.

"No, no, senor!" she cried. "I sent for you because there was no other way, that is all. My father would not let you come to the house. You will not think me bold?"

"Of course not." "I could not let you go until you knew the truth. You do not believe it was my fault?"

"I don't know what to believe, because I don't know what has happened. All I know is that I got a note from your father. But no matter what it is I'll never give you up," he declared stubbornly.

"Ah, I feared you would say those very words, but you must do it just the same. It will be hard for us both, I know, but—" She choked and shook her head as the words refused to come. "Tell me first why I must give you up?"

"Because in spite of all I am to marry Ramon," Gertrudis said wretchedly.

"Who said so?"

"My father. He has forbidden me to think of you and ordered that I marry Ramon. Sick or well, living or dead, I must marry him."

"I'm hanged if you do!"

"It is those miserable politics again. If I do not obey, my father cannot be president, do you see? Senor Alfarez is terribly angry that I refused to marry his son, to whom since I was a little child I have been engaged. Ramon also is furious; he threatened to kill himself. So it comes to this then. If I will not bind myself to the agreement, Senor Alfarez will contest the election. I do not know how you say those things, but my father will be defeated. Perhaps he will be humiliated."

"I won't stand for it. They're making you a sacrifice, that's all. What kind of a father is it who would sell his daughter?"

"No, no! You do not understand. He is proud; he cannot accept defeat; he would rather give his life than be humiliated. Furthermore, he wishes me to marry Ramon, and so that ends it." Her lips were trembling as she peered up at him to see if he really understood.

Let them rave, dear. What does it matter who is president? What does anything matter to you and me?"

"He says I am too young to know my own mind, and—perhaps that is true, Senor Antonio; perhaps I shall soon forget you and learn to love Ramon as he loves me. I do not know."

In spite of the pathetic quaver in her voice, Kirk cried with jealous bitterness:

"You don't seem to object very strongly; you seem to care about as much for Alfarez as you do for me. Is that it?"

"Yes, senor," she said bravely.

"You are lying!" declared Stephanie, suddenly.

The girl burst into a perfect torrent of weeping that shamed him. Then, without any invitation, she flung herself recklessly into his arms and lay there, trembling, palpitating like an imprisoned bird.

"Forgive me, dear," he exclaimed, softly. "I knew better all the time. You mustn't think of doing what they ask; I won't allow it." She looked up with eyes gleaming through her tears and said, brokenly:

"Senor, I love you truly. You see, I cannot lie."

He breath intimated him, and he bent his head to kiss her. But Stephanie tore her roughly from his arms. The woman showed the strength of a man, and her vulture-like face was working fiercely as she cried:

"No! She is mine! She is mine! She is a good girl."

"Oh, I am wicked," Gertrudis said. "I love you, Kirk—yes, I love you very dearly, but my father—he refuses—I must obey—he has the right, and I must do as he wishes."

"Come with me now. We'll be married tonight," he urged, but she only clung to Stephanie more closely, as if to hold herself from falling.

"You are very sweet to me," she said, with piteous tenderness, "and I shall never forget the honor, but you see I cannot. This is more to my father than his life. It is the same to all our family, and I must do my duty. I could not let you go away thinking this was my doing, so I sent for you. No, one must obey one's people, for they are wise and good. But one should be honest."

The tears were stealing down her cheeks, and she thrilled to his pleadings as to some wondrous music; yet she was like adamant, and all his lover's desperation could not shake her. Seeing that his urging only made matters worse, he said, more gently:

"You are exalted now with the spirit of self sacrifice, but later you will see that I am right. I am not discouraged. A thousand things may happen. Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Let's wait and see if we can't find a way out. Now that I know you love me I have the courage to face anything, and I am going to win you, Chiquita. I have never lost in all my life, and I don't intend to begin now."

"I'll see your father in the morning, and I'll be here again tomorrow night."

But at this Gertrudis cried out: "No, no! I cannot meet you again in this manner." And Stephanie nodded her agreement.

"Then I'll see you the next night—that is, Saturday. You are coming to the big ball at the Tivoli with him and the Cortlandts. I must see you then, so make sure to be there, and meanwhile don't give up."

"Oh, there is no hope."

"There is always hope. I'll think of something."

"We must go," said the Barbadian woman warningly.

"Yes, yes, is is of no avail to resist," came the girl's choking voice. She stretched out her little hand, and then, looking up at him, said uncertainly, "I—may never speak with you again alone, senor, and I must pray to—cease loving you; but will you—kiss me once so that I may never forget?"



"Kiss me once so that I may never forget."

He breathed a tender exclamation and took her gently to his breast, while the negress stood by scowling and muttering. Even when she and Stephanie had melted into the shadows he stood motionless under the spell of that caress, his ecstasy still suffusing him. Then he turned and made his way up the street, but he went slowly, unseeing, as if he had beheld a vision.

CHAPTER XXI.

A Business Proposition.

EDITH CORTLANDT'S interview with the rival candidates for the Panamanian presidency formed but a part of her plan. She next held a long conversation with Colonel Jolson, to the end that on Friday morning Runnels heard a rumor that threw him into the greatest consternation. It was to the effect that instead of his succeeding to the office of superintendent he was to retain his old post and that Colonel Jolson's brother-in-law was to supersede him. Although the word was not authoritative, it came with sufficient directness to leave him agitated. If true it was, of course, equivalent to his discharge, for it meant that he could not even continue in his former position without putting himself in a light intolerable to any man of spirit. If he did not resign voluntarily he knew that his new superior would eventually force him to do so. For Blakeley would build up an organization of his own.

Inasmuch as his assistant was concerned in his threatened calamity, Runnels made haste to lay the matter before him.

"Then this would seem to end our fine hopes, eh?" said Kirk.

"Rather," Runnels broke out bitterly. "I've worked hard, Kirk, and I deserve promotion if anybody ever did. This other fellow is a dud—he has proven that. Why I've forgotten more railroad than he'll ever know. Every man on the system hates him and likes me; and on top of it all I was promised the job. It's tough on the wife and the kid."

He stopped to swallow his emotion and went on:

"I gave this job the best I had in me, for I had the idea that I was doing something patriotic, something for my country. That's the way they used to talk about this canal, you know. I've put in four years of hell; I've lost step with the world; I've lost my business connections in the States, and I haven't saved up any money. I can't quit, and yet I'll have to go back there and start at the bottom again. Those people don't know anything about these blasted politics. They'll think I made a failure here in government work, and I'll have to live it down. What are you going to do?"

(To be Continued.)

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